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CIRCUS AGENT PLEADS GUILTY TO SMUGGLING ALIENS AND VISA FRAUD

WASHINGTON – A former acrobatic performer who resides in Orlando, Fla., has pleaded guilty to charges of inducing aliens to enter the United States illegally and to making false statements in visa applications, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher and U.S. Attorney Paul I. Perez for the Middle District of Florida announced today.

Kristo Ivanov, 70, entered the plea today before U.S. District Court Judge Donald P. Dietrich in U.S. District Court in Orlando.

In his plea agreement, Ivanov admitted that from 2001 through February 2006, he personally helped as many as 870 aliens enter or remain in the United States through fraudulent means. He prepared visa applications for the aliens that falsely stated that they were circus performers coming to work in Florida circuses. In fact, none of the aliens had been hired by any of the circuses listed in the visa applications. Rather, the visa applications were simply a means for the aliens to enter or remain in the United States. Ivanov charged each alien from \$500 to \$2,500 to prepare the applications.

“Ivanov admits to helping hundreds of illegal aliens into the United States under false pretenses so that he could benefit financially,” said Assistant Attorney General Fisher. “We will not allow this type of exploitation of our immigration system, which poses a risk to the security of our nation.”

“Smuggling aliens into the United States is an insult to those who enter our country legally,” said U.S. Attorney Paul I. Perez. “Millions of people have worked long and hard to enter the U.S. legally and become productive citizens. Those who try to take a shortcut by smuggling, must be stopped.”

Ivanov, a Bulgarian native who is now a naturalized American citizen, came to the United States in 1980 as an acrobat for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He has owned and operated a circus booking agency, Magic Star Entertainment, of Lake Mary, Fla., for more than five years and used that agency to fraudulently sponsor aliens to enter or remain in the United States.

As part of his plea agreement, Ivanov agreed to forfeit to the United States approximately \$600,000 he earned in smuggling fees. Sentencing is scheduled for March 2007.

“Businesses who knowingly sponsor foreign nationals under false pretenses should know that you will be caught,” said Robert Weber, Special Agent in Charge for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Office of Investigations in Tampa. “The federal government will not tolerate the exploitation of our nation’s visa system.”

“Visa fraud potentially threatens the national security of the United States. The U.S. passport and visa are two of the most coveted travel documents in the world, and foreign nationals who have acquired passports and visas fraudulently to enter the United States could perpetrate further illegal acts to include terrorism. These crimes make the United States more vulnerable to terrorism, plain and simple,” said Joe D. Morton, Director of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security, ICE and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Department of Homeland Security. The case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Cynthia Hawkins of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Middle District of Florida and Trial Attorney Arlene Reidy of the Domestic Security Section of the Criminal Division.

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